

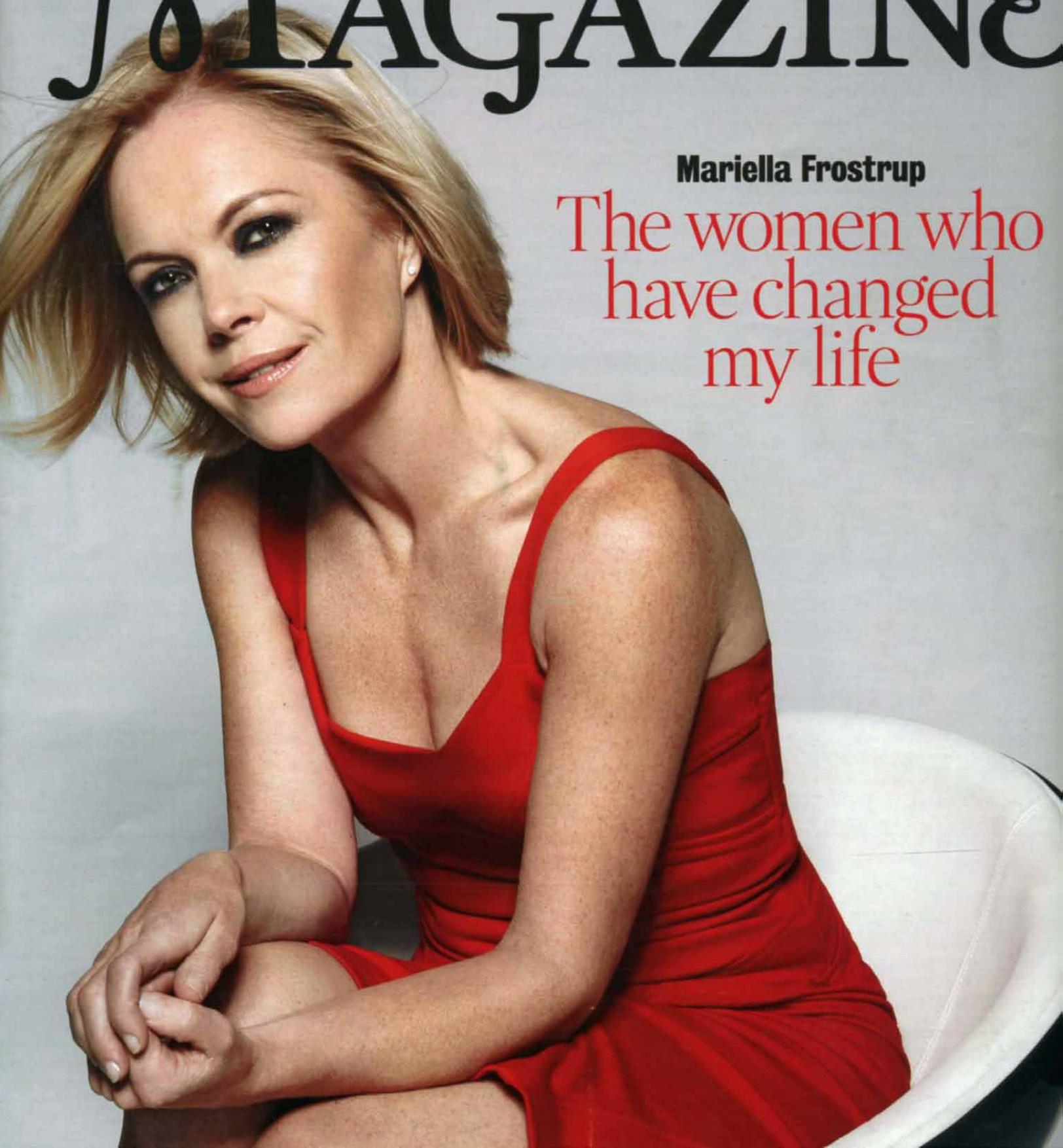
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The women who
have changed
my life

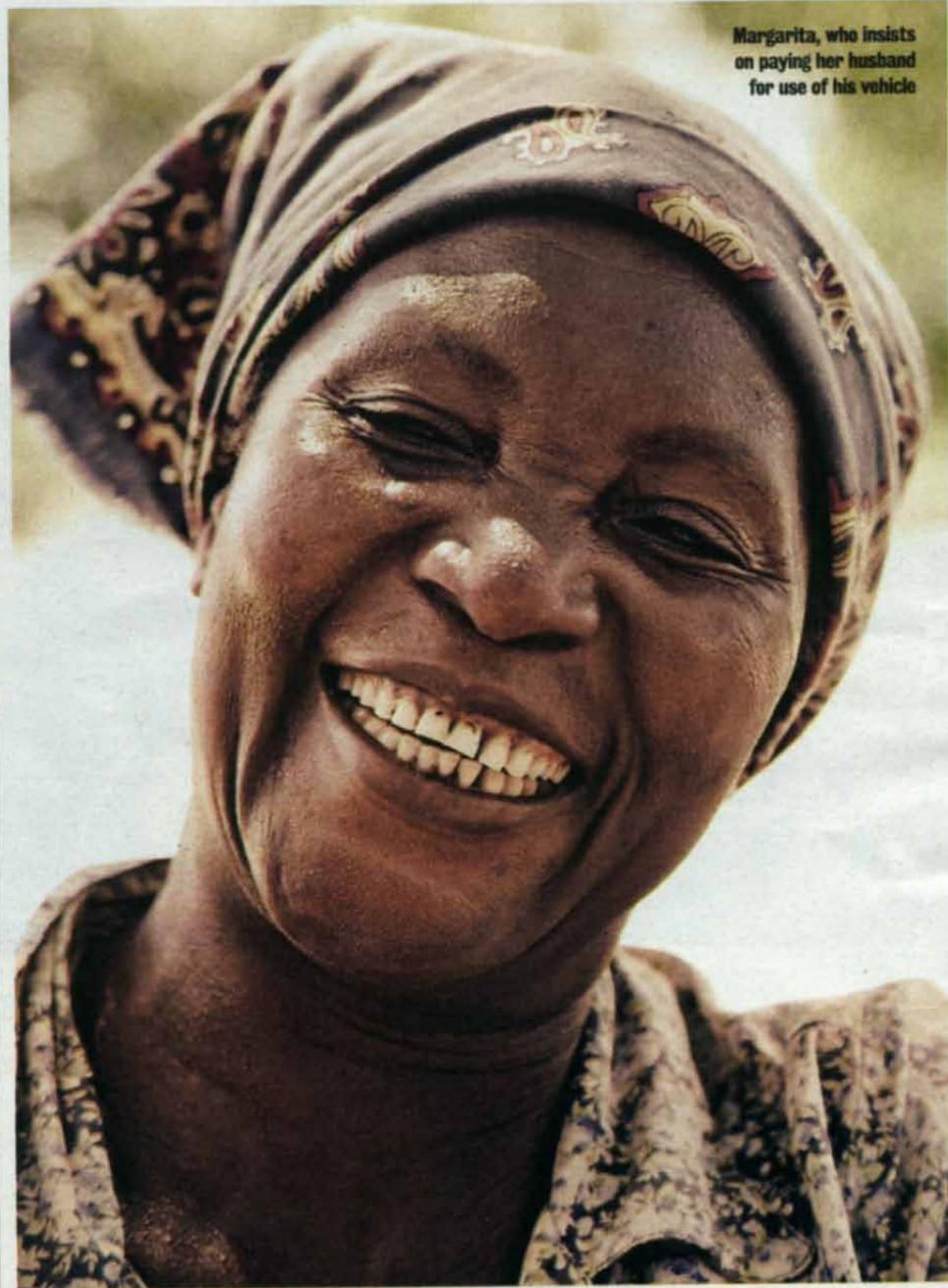




MARIELLA'S MISSION

When Mariella Frostrup heard the remarkable stories of women transforming their lives in poverty-stricken Mozambique, her own life was irrevocably changed, too

PHOTOGRAPHS Nick Aldridge



Margarita, who insists on paying her husband for use of his vehicle

I ask how many of the women gathered have been victims of domestic violence. All raise their hands

among whom illiteracy runs at between 70 and 80 per cent and domestic violence is commonplace.

Maria also ensured her daughters were educated. One has since moved to Maputo, she says proudly. "While I'm down there digging," she says, pointing to the cultivated land that lies in the valley below the plateau where we sit, "I like to imagine her, sitting in a café, having a coffee." The other women chuckle in delight at the unimaginable indulgence of such an experience.

Women like those assembled around me

It's only a two-hour drive from Mozambique's capital, Maputo, to Manica Province, but it feels like travelling back centuries. Children in third-generation hand-me-downs run barefoot between the mud-based, corrugated iron-topped huts. But it's when I hear more about the lives of the village women that I realise the extent to which time has stood still.

Under the shade of a large tree in 40-degree heat, Rabeca, a tall, broad-shouldered widow in her mid-forties, reveals how hard her life has been. She was in her twenties when her husband died. On the day of his death, her in-laws evicted her and her four children, forcing her off the land she had farmed by hand to feed them. Homeless and uneducated, with no rights to an inheritance and only the 100 meticaís (about £2) that her in-laws begrudgingly gave her, she was forced to start again.

Rabeca's experience is echoed by the 12 women gathered around me. Margarita and Maria confide that they have been violently abused by their husbands, who regularly steal money "to spend on drink and other women". I ask how many have been victims of domestic violence and it feels as if the world has momentarily stopped turning when every single woman raises her hand. "Men here think women are slaves," says one. Another describes her husband as behaving like "a king in the middle of his wives". "Surely one of you has had a good experience of a man?" I ask. "I heard about a good man once," says the oldest member of the group, holding my gaze, "but I never saw him with my own eyes." It's a joke that crosses continents and it feels good to laugh together.

But I'm not here to dwell on the misery that exists for many women in Africa; I've come to celebrate their escalating achievements. All those present are signed-up members of the Rural Women's Forum of Manica Province, a coalition of women farmers supported by Graça Machel (Mrs Nelson Mandela) and Oxfam.

And as the women continue, it becomes clear that they are determined things should change, that the next generation should not endure the same lives they have.

Rabeca, for example, not only survived being cast out by her in-laws, but scraped enough money together to educate her children, supporting them through higher education from the sale of crops cultivated with bare hands and hoe. Then she set about educating herself. The pivotal moment in a story defined by hardship and abuse came in 2004 when, at the age of 41, she went back to school to learn to read and write. Now Rabeca is an activist fighting for the rights of Mozambique's rural women,



Young girls in Manica Province

telling their tales make up the largest unpaid workforce in Mozambique. Looking at their gnarled hands, scarred feet and prematurely aged faces, the price they've paid is all too clear. Having never had an education or the confidence to speak out individually, the Rural Women's Forum is now their passion. Membership gives them strength in numbers, the wherewithal to register their ownership of land and, by extension, the opportunity to lobby politicians. More importantly, it offers them hope for the future, not merely for themselves, but for their daughters.

They proudly invite me to examine the fruits of their labour, and in single file we descend the narrow mud path that leads to their crops. It's a tranquil scene of lovingly tended tropical plants, predominantly cassava and banana, separated by a series of long, lily-strewn ponds. These ponds, it transpires, are the brainchild of a neighbouring Rural Women's Forum further north, who started farming fish to provide much needed protein for their children.

There are 46 women working the 60 hectares of land in the sun-baked valley.

'Our girls will only face lives of suffering like ours unless we can give them education'

They set 5 per cent of the crops aside to fund the association, and the rest feeds the village. Margarita describes her husband as "retired", and explains how working within the organisation has increased her profits. This season she had money spare to hire her husband's "vehicle" to take her produce to market. "Surely he could have just lent it to you?" I ask aghast. "I insisted on paying," she replies. "He had been undermining my work in the forum but now, since I was

able to pay him, he treats me with respect."

It may be 40 years since Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, but look beyond our borders at the lives of women and it's clear that many have been left untouched by emancipation. The rumour is that as we mature we mellow, but if that's the case something's badly wrong with my hard-wiring. I think it was a report from the Congo that finally got to me. A woman who'd been raped at gunpoint then had to watch soldiers doing likewise to her 11-year-old daughter.

Or at least I think it was then. It might have been a few months earlier, visiting Goz Beida IDP camp in Chad and hearing the stories of women terrorised and displaced by the civil war in Sudan: babies decapitated in their arms; kept as sex slaves by units of Janjawid militia; and even now, in the "relative safety" of the camps, the simple act of gathering firewood making rape an everyday danger. It's a crime that in Sudan goes unpunished, it being more likely that they'll find the victim guilty of adultery than the perpetrator guilty of a criminal offence. With no hope of improving their lives,

overburdened with children and at the mercy of a misogynistic culture in which basic human rights are denied them, the lives of these women were almost unimaginable to an emancipated, Western woman like myself. Mitigating my sense of helpless rage was the company I found myself in there: a group of extraordinary African women leaders and activists who had gathered in Chad to bear witness to the atrocities still being perpetrated. It was the presence of these leading women – including the managing director of the World Bank, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, internationally renowned singer Angelique Kidjo and the general secretary of the World YWCA at the time, Dr Musimbi Kanyoro – and the fact that they represent a new force in African society, that offered hope as I wept through another refugee's story, recounted while she breastfed her rapist's daughter.

Feminist scholar Isabel Casimiro, a former member of parliament in Mozambique, has been fighting for women's rights since the days when, she says, they were regarded as "silly women, without men, frustrated, badly dressed and with their bras on fire". She grew up under the presidency of the Marxist rebel-turned-President Samora Machel, a supporter of women who said, "Without the liberation of women there can be no liberation of the society." After an hour in the company of this inspirational ex-revolutionary, even Nick, our robust photographer, is a paid-up member of the sisterhood. I imagine this firebrand beauty, now in her late fifties and looking like a cross between Patti Smith and Ulrike Meinhof, striding the countryside in her combats with rifle slung over her shoulder. No wonder Mozambique's current President, Casimiro's one-time Frelimo party comrade and Marxist guerrilla fighter Armando E. Guebuza, has been swayed by many of her initiatives.

The President may not be everyone's darling, but he has clearly recognised the benefits of putting women at the forefront of new policies. Since he took office, constitutional changes have taken place to encourage the involvement of women in all areas of political, economical, social and cultural life. Mozambique has achieved more than 30 per cent representation of women in parliament (an embarrassing 10 per cent higher than in the UK), introduced a Family Law that gives men and women equal rights of inheritance, and is in the process of ratifying legislation that makes domestic violence a crime. In a further attempt to reduce epidemic levels of violence against women, especially staffed gender-specific units have been set up in almost every police station to deal in particular with domestic violence and rape. Another progression that leaves us lagging behind. It's such initiatives that prompted Geneva-based NGO Femmes



Rabeca went back to school at the age of 41

'Tell your friends how we suffer, then surely our sisters will hold out their hands to us'

Africa Solidarité to award Guebuza the African Gender Award last year, an honour created to make the improvement of women's status on the African continent a coveted goal rather than a reluctant obligation on behalf of political leaders.

Certainly, under Guebuza's presidency signs of progress are clearly visible in Mozambique's capital. What felt like a ghost town when I visited just six years, after the civil war ended in 1992, is now a bustling city with new buildings springing up and gated communities for "professionals" dotting the promenade.

Down one of the main thoroughfares, in a first-floor conference room, I meet the five members of the Women-Led Business (WLB) initiative. Our host, Natividade Bule, an energetic fortysomething with close-cropped hair and a pale mixed-race complexion, recently expanded her conference and wedding planning business to include a restaurant below her office, where we go for lunch. Lanterna is clearly a favourite

with local businessmen, who make up the lunchtime crowd that surrounds our solitary table of women. Over a local dish of crab, peanuts, cassava leaves and coconut milk we share frustrations and triumphs.

I'm asked by the ebullient Amelia Zambezi, who runs her own bag factory, whether it's true that successful businesswomen in the West are unmarried and miserable. She's delighted to learn that it's not a compulsory qualification, but the question proves how far a negative stereotype can travel. This group recently took part in a training exercise sponsored by the Spanish government and organised by Femmes Africa Solidarité. During a week in Spain they learnt how to write a business plan and are now waiting to discover which one will be singled out for specific funding. That these women already employ more than 100 staff without having trained in such basic skills is a credit to their confidence and spirit of enterprise.

It's a salutary example of how rudimentary the requirements are to improve opportunities, and how easily businessmen and women in the developed world could contribute in sharing knowledge and participating in online mentoring schemes. Negating the notion that women in business are competitive rivals, this group have become firm friends, exchanging business tips and opportunities with women from other African countries who are also part of the WLB initiative. Two groups from Botswana and Sierra Leone are already trading in ingredients for beauty products as a direct result of the scheme. Along with improving their career prospects, the WLB group aims to provide young women with role models in a society where positive examples of female achievement are often hard to come by.

Education of girls is top of the list of priorities here. At the Rural Women's Forum I asked the group each to choose between a fantastically fertile piece of land, an end to the violence at home or an education for their daughters. They were unanimous in their vote for the latter, Rabeca speaking for them all when she said, "Our girls will only face lives of suffering like ours unless we can give them an education. The friends I had who went on to high school have become teachers and doctors. They lead lives it's hard for me to imagine. That's what we want for our daughters." It's no coincidence – that the entrepreneurs of the WLB had all been sent to school, but they are exceptions. Post-primary school attendance for girls in Mozambique lies below the 40 per cent mark, so educating girls remains a challenge.

My next visit is to the offices of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), a pan-African organisation committed to the education of girls. There, three

enthusiastic young women from Namaacha High School, which Rabeca dreamt of attending as a teenager, enlighten me on their ambitions. In contrast to the farmland women, these schoolgirls are striking in how much younger than their years they look. Not only are they slight, but they display a refreshing naivety and innocence unrecognisable from my experience of A-level students in the UK. Their career choices speak volumes for the ambitions of this new generation. Drofe, 18, is intent on becoming an electronics engineer; 15-year-old Edite a campaigning lawyer; and the youngest, 13-year-old Jessica, burns to be an accountant. She explains with great seriousness that control of finances is very important for a woman. All three cite "studying" as their favourite activity and it's shaming to see the elevated position education holds in their lives. Back home, where we take such rights for granted, a similar gathering would no doubt be gossiping about the latest *X Factor* result and elaborating on their ambitions to be the next Cheryl Cole.

In Mozambique, life for women is slowly improving, albeit from a lowly start point. Thankfully it's not the only country where things are on the move. Femmes Africa Solidarité singled out Rwanda's President Paul Kagame for the African Gender Award in 2007, and women now make up an unbelievable 54 per cent of the Rwandan Parliament. It's no coincidence that this significant progress should occur in a country where women were also heavily involved in negotiating the peace process.

The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MORWPN), awarded the United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights, is a tangible example of women uniting to overcome conflict. A heart-warming documentary, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, charts their remarkable story: how a small group of Liberian women banded together in 2003 to protest peacefully against the civil war and the bloodthirsty regime of Liberia's former dictator Charles Taylor. A brave cross-religious group of Christians and Muslims, they eventually forced the President and the rebel leaders to the negotiating table. Taylor finally stood down, and in 2005 Liberia elected the first female African president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

My companion on my trip to Mozambique was inspirational South African lawyer Thandi Orleyn. A diminutive powerhouse, Orleyn balances a business career at the helm of an all-female investment company with being the wife of a tribal chief. She points out that, despite huge advances in her own country post-apartheid, millions of women across Africa remain all but invisible, denied the basic rights that Mandela and the ANC fought

In all the media's fixation with 'having it all', the plight of the majority of the world's women is barely mentioned

for. Over dinner in Maputo's latest restaurant, Zambezi, where prices for a meal run higher than the rural women's annual salary, I ask her what she feels would most improve the lives of African women. She's unequivocal: "To be educated, economically empowered and independent." Orleyn is a perfect example. She was the first black female law graduate from Port Elizabeth University, an achievement she puts down to her first school, set up in 1869 to offer graduates of a local boys' school "wives who could understand them". When I ask how she balances being the wife of a tribal leader with her independent career, she shrugs off the accomplishment, saying, "I told him from the beginning how it would be. He accepted." They now have grown-up children: material evidence of the success of that compromise.

Bob Dylan immortalised the "pretty girls in Mozambique" in his song celebrating the pleasures of the country, but it's his anthem *The Times They Are a-Changin'* that best sums up the revolution that is taking shape across Africa right now. Under the banner of "Gender Is My Agenda", small and large lobby groups, NGOs and women's organisations have joined together. The African Union has declared 2010 to 2020 "The African Women's Decade". Politicians and Western NGOs are slowly waking up to the potential of gender initiatives, with women having proved themselves the most reliable creditors and energetic business partners.

Yet despite the many examples of women's power to facilitate positive change, the reticence of the international community to link women's rights issues with the handing out of development aid remains puzzling. Dying children appeal to our sense of guilt, but empowering women so that they can take responsibility for their children's wellbeing has less of a hold on our heartstrings, even though it is arguably the only successful way to secure their futures.

The continuing denial of basic human rights to entire female populations is as

important an issue in our time as the fight against apartheid once was. Yet there's no mention of boycotts and sanctions to help the cause of these women. They are as much prisoners of an unjust system as Mandela was when he languished on Robben Island, but because their incarceration is in the benign-sounding confines of "home", their appalling conditions go largely unchampioned. From Sudan to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya to Mozambique, a considerable proportion of the female population is still living as we were in the Middle Ages. It's to our shame that, in all the fixation in our media with "having it all", the plight of the majority of the world's women, still untouched by such covetable dilemmas, barely merits a mention.

There's an African saying that goes, "Give a woman £1 and she'll turn it into £10." On a continent so dependent on aid, it's ironic that an asset as valuable as the female population continues to be squandered. These women know what they need and how to achieve it, but that doesn't mean they should be left in isolation. In recognition of how global support matters, both in offering solidarity and lobbying politicians to do more, I've played a part in establishing a support organisation, the Femmes Africa Solidarité Trust. Our ambition is to bring the FAS African Gender Award to a worldwide audience, help fundraising for gender specific initiatives, and celebrate enthusiastically those leaders, such as Guebuza, who are blazing a pioneering trail by supporting the human rights of their female population. Patrons include men and women, from Bono and Damon Albarn to Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Glenys Kinnock, Annie Lennox to Graça Machel and Angelique Kidjo, who understand and appreciate the potential of African women.

We can all play an indispensable role in ensuring that the networks women are forging across Africa have global reach. The energetic, ambitious, enthusiastic women I met on my trip were tangible examples of that potential. As my tour of the women of Manica's farmland ended, I asked them what message I should take back home with me. Rabeca was again spokeswoman. "Tell your friends how we live, tell them how we suffer, not just us here in Manica, but across the country, then surely our sisters will hold out their hands to us." Then these extraordinary, resilient women, with their calloused hands, ragged clothes and faces lined with strife, kneeled down and sang to show their gratitude. I sank to my knees with them in shame for how little we've done and cried all over again. ■

For further information on how you can help to support the initiatives mentioned, contact fast-foundation.org; fasngo.org; oxfam.org